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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 001000

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SUBJECT: THE GREATEST THREATS TO THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION  
(C-AL6-01048)

REF: NOUAKCHOTT 764

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Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

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(C) Key Points  
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-- The largest threat to the democratic transition is another coup led by military officers dissatisfied with how the transition is unfolding.

-- While overt/overt electoral interference by the military council cannot be ruled out, it seems unlikely.

-- If the council were to interfere, they would likely follow a more subtle path through secret campaign contributions, backroom candidate endorsements or by adopting electoral procedures that favor particular parties.

-- However, there is no evidence to date that the council is backing any candidate or party.

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(C) Comments  
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-- While rumors abound about fissures in the CMJD, we have seen no concrete evidence of this. Our best guess is that the transition will go to its end, resulting in elections that will be accepted by both Mauritians and the international community, with a handover to the civilian government as planned.

-- However, many questions remain about what comes next and the post-election role of Fal and the other council members. The military has always played a significant role here, and elections alone will not change that, nor will they change Fal or the military's influence over public affairs.

-- Striking the correct civil-military relationship will likely be among the new government's most formidable tasks.

End Key Points and Comments.

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A COUP - THE LARGEST THREAT TO SUCCESSFUL ELECTIONS  
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¶1. (C) The current democratic transition was set into motion following the coup of August 2005, and ironically, a new coup presents the largest threat to the ultimate success of the transition. As the transition to democracy will not end with the presidential elections in March, but will take years to build up, so too will the threat of a coup remain for the foreseeable future.

¶2. (U) On June 20 the government arrested several high ranking military officers and civilians for allegedly plotting a coup (reftel), and both government officials and citizens alike believe additional coup attempts are possible.

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WHY AND FROM WHERE?  
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¶3. (C) Mauritania's long history of coups (from Colonel Saleh in 1978 to Army Chief of Staff Taya in 1984 to Colonel Fal in 2005) have all come from high-ranking military officers close to the head of state. While it seems likely that a future coup would also come from an officer, it is not clear how close this officer might be to Fal or the council. Some believe the next coup will come from officers close to former president Taya (such as the men recently arrested), while others believe the coup will stem from members of the military council who are disaffected by the process.

¶4. (C) Other possible threats to the transition, including civil strife and extremist activity, grow less likely as the process continues. Aggrieved minorities seem to have

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accepted the process despite its flaws and the government's lack of responsiveness to their concerns, and the government has kept a good lid on extremist activity.

¶5. (C) A coup prior to the elections could be led by officers who feel they are not getting their share of the new found wealth that this transitional government has amassed. There are rumors that Fal is feathering his own bed (septel), and that other officers, who have not been at the trough so long, might be resentful. Another scenario would have officers derailing the process because they dislike the way the elections are going (if an Islamist or non-White Moor became the presidential front runner for example).

¶6. (C) Even following the elections, the possibility of another coup remains strong if the military leaders sense that their economic welfare is threatened or fear that the new government might represent a personal risk to the officer, either through a military restructuring or perhaps through pursuing convictions for past human rights abuses committed by officers in the 1980s and 90s (Taya is currently being pursued in a Belgian court for such abuses).

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WILL THE COUNCIL INTERFERE IN THE TRANSITION?  
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¶7. (C) While overt/overt electoral interference by the military council cannot be ruled out, it seems unlikely. The council's actions to date have been consistent with the democratic transition plan they agreed to in negotiations with the US, EU, and UN, and the June 25 constitutional referendum to limit important powers of the president was deemed free and fair by all observers, including post. In short, they have gone to a lot of trouble to do it right if, in the end, they intend to explicitly interfere and throw it all away.

¶8. (C) If the council were to interfere, they would likely follow a more subtle path of influencing the election outcome through secret campaign contributions, backroom deals to endorse specific candidates or by adopting electoral procedures that favor particular parties (such as public funding for political campaigns). They would likely work within the democratic system, rather than against it. For many observers, it seems probable that the council will follow this more subtle approach (either in an organized fashion or with council members acting independently).

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WILL THE COUNCIL STEP DOWN?  
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¶9. (C) Yes. It seems likely that the council and Fal will step down. He will probably retire as well, to build on his legacy and possibly prepare for a run at the presidency sometime in the future. However, the more important question is what comes next? What will they do after they hand over power? What role will the military play in the civilian government? The answers to these questions are much more difficult.

¶10. (C) It seems clear that the military will remain a central player in the Mauritanian power balance. They have always had significant power (most often through direct rule of the country), and elections alone will not change that. While some may retire, most council members will likely remain the most powerful military leaders in the country, and will therefore likely continue holding many of the strings. Even when some leaders leave, the seconds in command are ready to step up and provide continuity.

¶11. (C) Thus it will be incredibly important that the new government form a positive relationship with the military, while not ceding too much power to this long-standing authority. If too much power is handed back to the military, then the democratic transition will have only succeeded in electing a puppet government; while if the new government tries to drain too much power to quickly from the military, the threat of another coup will dramatically increase. In either case, striking the correct civil-military relationship

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is likely to be among the new governments most formidable tasks.  
LeBaron